

1800 BLOCK WEST GIRARD AVENUE (HOUSES)
South side
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6678
PA,51-PHILA,754-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1800 BLOCK, W. GIRARD AVENUE

HABS No. PA-6678

LOCATION: 1800 block, W. Girard Avenue, south side between N. Nineteenth Street and Ridge Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The relatively simple, but finely detailed dwellings in the 1800 block of W. Girard Avenue attest to the importance and prestige of that thoroughfare throughout the entire second half of the nineteenth century. The construction of these ten attached houses—along with the earlier Northwestern National Bank and four attached store-dwellings on Ridge Avenue—effectively completed development of this high profile intersection. Clearly meant for occupants of some means, Nos. 1816–1834 are representative of the standard scale for middle-class attached dwellings constructed in North Philadelphia late in the nineteenth century. The somewhat exotic façade articulation—designed by well-known Philadelphia architect Willis G. Hale—belies their high visibility on a major avenue.

DESCRIPTION:

Nos. 1816–1834 W. Girard Avenue comprise a single row of attached dwellings extending from Northwestern National Bank at the southwest corner of Girard and Ridge Avenues to Nineteenth Street in North Philadelphia. The ten dwellings are grouped in mirror image pairs which alternate between two façade variations. The single corner unit (No. 1834) differs from the others only in size as the house fills the entire width of the lot; its west wall along N. Nineteenth Street contains—among other windows—a three-sided bay at the second story. Unlike most rows of attached houses in North Philadelphia, the physical division between units or pairs is not expressed on the façade or at the cornice line. The foundations of the six western units extend up one foot higher than the four eastern units, however given the uniform expanse of the cornice line (with a denticulated bed mold), it is evident that the difference is made up in slightly lower ceiling heights on the second and third stories.

All of the houses contain three stories over a semi-raised basement and are constructed of brick with stone and wood trim. The foundation wall contains at street level three windows fronted by decorative iron grilles and surrounded by raised stone “panels” with rough faces. The first floor is divided into two bays: a door surrounded by a stone ogee arch frame and topped by tudor arch transoms on one side, and a group of three rectangular windows topped by three square transoms on the other. The continuous sill line terminates in carved foliate bosses on each side of the doors. A single course of stone springs from one side of the door and continues around the triple windows before traveling onto the next unit. Likewise, a thin stone stringcourse extends across all of the facades above the lintels/arches of the third-floor window openings.

Nos. 1816–1818, 1824–1826, 1832–1834 comprise one variation of the façade. In these units, the two-bay division is abandoned above the first story. Instead, a large three-sided bay window is centered in the wall at the second story. The roof of the bay doubles as the floor of a third-story balcony that was originally enclosed by a decorative iron railing. Access to the balcony is by means of glazed double doors flanked by large, fixed-pane windows all recessed within a three-centered brick arch. The wall surrounding the arch extends one brick beyond the façade plane. Above the thin stringcourse, an arcade of four narrow blind tudor arches springs between the cornice brackets.

Nos. 1820–1822, 1828–1830 account for the second façade variation. In these units, the two-bay façade arrangement is continued on the upper stories. The four windows, two on each story, are aligned with one another with the vertical pairs separated by a denticulated recessed panel. These vertical groupings are delineated by bands made up of diagonally set bricks. The continuous stone stringcourses and the window sills break out at these vertical bands. The three vertical units—the two window bays and the wall between—are underscored by three blind ogee arches springing from the vertical bands between the four cornice brackets.

The ten three-story dwellings display footprints common to most other North Philadelphia rows. Pairs of dwellings—distinct from the pairs of mirror image facades which share full-length party walls—enjoy light and ventilation wells formed by the ells at the rear. Only the single corner unit, No. 1834, which fills its plot and No. 1816 whose well faces Northwestern National Bank, do not conform to the double-well arrangement. All of the dwellings have one story porches at the rear and access to back alleys. The non-rectilinear shape of the block lent to differentiation in lot depths. Nos. 1816–1822 have depths that are considerably greater than Nos. 1824–1834.

Overall, the 1800 block of Girard Avenue remains in fair condition. Some of the units remain well cared for and serve commercial functions, while other units are unoccupied and with windows boarded.

HISTORY:

NORTH PHILADELPHIA

For the first 150 years, the physical expansion of Philadelphia remained intricately tied to the Delaware River. The neatly gridded plan laid-out by William Penn late in 1682 was originally composed of twenty-two blocks extending between the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers. Development in the colonial city occurred largely in the blocks east of the center square, organically spilling over north (Northern Liberties) and south (Southwark) of the grid along the Delaware long before driving west towards Schuylkill. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, commercial establishments continued their march further west along Market Street and the Center Square became home to the city's first pumping station—an impressive structure designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe. By the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, well-heeled Philadelphians looked westward for the formation of their elite enclaves on and around Rittenhouse Square and even across the Schuylkill. If not fully developed—an action that would take many decades—the remainder of Penn's city was at least staked-out.

In the eighteenth century, the areas northwest of Northern Liberties and north along the Schuylkill evolved as the location of wealthy Philadelphians' country estates and a variety of more modest farmsteads. Nearly every prominent family in the city owned both a spacious townhouse, as well as an expansive, Georgian-plan rural retreat offering respite from the summer heat and the seasonal epidemics that plagued the dense city. These residences and the neighboring working farms were casually positioned in the landscape and tied together by a tangle of country roads. Their form and direction was based more on property divisions and topography than the rational linearity of the urban grid to the south. Reflections printed in 1883 nostalgically characterized this early landscape: "the whole neighborhood was then a pretty piece of country, upon which the country-seats of noted Philadelphians stood."¹ While the dominant landscape for well over a century, this bucolic mix of farms, country houses, and rural lanes began to change in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

In 1843, the irregularly platted blocks of the crossroads village of Francisville—turned 45° to the city grid and aligned with the Ridge Road—existed as the northernmost developed blocks west of Broad Street. Most higher density development north of the city remained east of Broad in the Spring Garden District.² West of Broad, the most significant expansion in the antebellum period was a variety of institutions that reflected the social reform and education fervor gripping the entire country, but particularly pronounced in Philadelphia.

Within the northern reaches of the Spring Garden District, the groundbreaking and influential Eastern State Penitentiary fronted Coates Street (Fairmount Avenue) and had its perimeter wall and initial cells completed by 1829.³ A few blocks to the north, within Penn Township, the original Girard College orphans' school buildings, designed by Thomas U. Walter, rose on capacious grounds beginning 1833 with construction continuing through the end of 1847.⁴ Concurrent with this building campaign, Girard Avenue became an important transportation corridor and fashionable thoroughfare, centered on an increasingly German-dominated population.⁵ Certainly, the location of Girard College enhanced the development potential of the avenue. However, the fact that Girard was half-as-much-more broad than nearby parallel streets it could accommodate both the expanding horse car lines, as well as other traffic, running between Broad Street and the Schuylkill River.⁶ A few blocks east of Girard College on this premier avenue, the steeple of the Green Hill Presbyterian Church, constructed in 1847–1848 on plans by John Notman, pierced the skyline. Directly south across Girard Avenue, St. Joseph's Hospital was installed in a double house purchased by the

¹"Improvements in the Northwestern Part of the City—Professor Wagner's Recollections—The Progress of Time," *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* 18 Aug. 1883, from Scrapbooks of the Wagner Free Institute of Science, 1847–1980, box 8, vol. 3.

²Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) 287.

³J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, vol. III (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884) 1835.

⁴The Penn District was "erected out of Penn Township" by an Act of Assembly on February 26, 1844. The district was enlarged by Act of Assembly on February 17, 1847 and became the 20th Ward under the Act of Consolidation on February 2, 1854.

⁵George E. Thomas, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Girard Avenue Historic District," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 13 May 1985, item 8.

⁶*Ibid.*

Sisters of St. Joseph on June 18, 1849.⁷ The hospital added a number of more substantial buildings over fifteen years beginning in 1852.⁸

While this institutional expansion was significant, it did not greatly change the area's rural atmosphere. However, the massive population explosion in antebellum Philadelphia, with over half a million residents by 1860, pushed the necessity for rational planning of the city's inevitable and imminent physical expansion. In the 1840s, the grid of Penn's city was, on paper, extended northward over the houses, farms, institutions, and irregular lanes up to the borders of Roxborough and Germantown.⁹ The 1854 Act of Consolidation brought a number of adjacent, but municipally independent, townships under the jurisdiction of the City of Philadelphia. The rationale for this move was simple:

the city and contiguous territory had practically become one city, with a common future and common wants, and their adequate development was crippled by the multiplicity and jealousy of the many existing governing bodies acting independently of one each other.¹⁰

With political uniformity completed, the consolidated government worked to standardize the organization of street names and numbering, utilizing a highly logical system that was first employed in Penn's city in 1853 and extended throughout the consolidated city in 1858.¹¹ The restructuring of the city politic and street grid established, expansion northward could commence unabated, however it did not come to fruition until the decades after the Civil War, at a pace that few could have imagined in 1860.

Historically, wealthy and many middling Philadelphians largely remained quartered in center city. Some higher density row-type housing did go up north of Penn's city. Until early in the 1870s, however, most of this construction west of Broad terminated with Girard Avenue. In the 1870s, horsecar ("streetcar") extensions and road surface improvements made blocks north of Girard Avenue attractive to upper-class Philadelphians. From that location, the city's political and economic powerbrokers resided within easy reach, by horsecar or private coach, of the center city commercial district.

Commodious row and single-family houses intended for upper-class owners and tenants rapidly lined the streets of North Philadelphia, particularly along Broad Street. The men who made ostentatious statements of their wealth through the houses they constructed failed to penetrate the social and power circles of Philadelphia's old and established blue-blood families. The wealthy of the North Broad Street area were the *nouveaux riches* who made their fortunes in ways that differed from the practices of Philadelphia's staid gentry. In the 1870s

⁷Scharf, vol. II, 1679.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Plan of the District and Township of Penn, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Fox & Haines, 1847).

¹⁰Edward P. Allinson, *Philadelphia 1681-1887: A History of Municipal Development* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, Publishers, 1887) 140-141.

¹¹Russell F. Weigley, "The Border City in Civil War, 1854-1865," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 375.

and 1880s, Philadelphia's patrician families maintained their residences in Rittenhouse Square or in suburban Chestnut Hill.¹²

After 1880, the pace of expansion became frantic. Row housing for all tiers of the social hierarchy were going up on first-rate, second-rate, and tertiary streets. The move from horsecars to cable and electric streetcar lines made the journey to the central district an option affordable to middle-class professionals; a variety of lower-status work possibilities in the area, including some industry, brought an influx of solidly working-class residents as well. An 1883 article highlighting a prominent North Philadelphia educational institution, the Wagner Free Institute of Science constructed between 1859 and 1865, noted the changes in the area.

Gradually the old landmarks began to disappear as the population and enterprise of Philadelphia increased...There are thousands of...houses now being built by persons in this neighborhood. The convenience offered by the street cars, the healthy atmosphere and the general neatness of the new houses combine to make the neighborhood agreeable and pleasant. Buildings are going up on Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth streets, and on Montgomery avenue, Berks, Diamond, Norris and other streets.¹³

By late in the 1880s, the frontage along another premier east-west thoroughfare—Diamond Street—in the blocks immediately west of Broad became lined with both staid and eclectically-styled rows. By 1892, when the first stones of the George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate—an unparalleled landmark of French gothic ecclesiastical design—were being laid, its Diamond Street site was surrounded in all directions by blocks upon blocks of attached urban dwellings.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the blocks furthest west from Broad Street along the final approach to Fairmount Park were among the last to be developed. This generally slow westward development along east-west thoroughfares stemmed from two major obstacles—topography and industry. Diamond Street did not extend all the way to the park until 1886, after a massive cemetery relocation and grading project undertaken by developer William M. Singerly.

The actual opening of Diamond Street thru (sic)
Odd Fellows Cemetery, and the removal of fences

¹²E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); George E. Thomas, "Architectural Patronage and Social Stratification in Philadelphia between 1840 and 1920," *The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800–1975*, eds. William W. Cutler and Howard Gillette (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) 85–123.

¹³"Improvements...," 18 Aug. 1883.

¹⁴G. M. Hopkins, *City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards* (Philadelphia, 1875); George W. and Walter S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*, volume 6 (Philadelphia, 1888); Ernest Hexamer, *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1892; revised 1893–1895).

that crossed this line, signalized the completion of the most extensive improvement ever projected in this city. Thus far...he has raised the grade of nearly two miles of streets...Persons who are unfamiliar with the locality as it was prior to the completion of these improvements can only have a faint conception of the transformation that has occurred there.¹⁵

In addition to the need for filling and grading, a degree of industry, though much more modest when compared to that elsewhere in the city, stymied development—particularly upper-end housing—furthest west. A great deal of North Philadelphia real estate west of Broad bordered on Brewerytown, a neighborhood of industrial operations and noxious smells and processes connected to the beer-making business. Brewerytown stretched from Thirtieth to Thirty-second Streets between Girard and Glenwood Avenues; factory owners wedged housing in the small streets between the main thoroughfares dedicated to manufacturing and service buildings.¹⁶ In the end, however, the amenities offered by Fairmount Park ultimately negated the detrimental effects of living in proximity to industry. Solidly blue-collar and small proprietor families headed by firemen, cooper, bartenders, butchers, grocers, and boardinghouse keepers had wended their way as far as Thirty-second and Thompson Streets by 1900. Streetcar lines provided the means for downtown pleasure seekers to reach the park, and for residents in areas bordering the park to commute to center city.¹⁷ By 1910, Thirty-third Street along the park was completely developed and the area between Broad Street and Fairmount Park was completely filled with houses, churches, schools, and businesses for scores of blocks northward from the city center.

As the final stages of development fully filled North Philadelphia blocks, the area was already going through pronounced demographic shifts. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the "graying" of many blocks proved key to their wholesale turnover to other groups. As elite Protestant homeowners of the first generation died, their descendants sold the properties and established residences in the Main Line suburbs. In the first major demographic shift in the 1920s, the two principal sorts of purchasers were organizations and upper-class Jewish families. The organizations largely took over the expansive and impractical Victorian mansions, while Jewish families and their associated social groups and congregations purchased both private residences and former churches.

Close on the heels of Protestant white middle and upper class migration out of the area was the flight of the white working class. Prohibition and the Great Depression devastated the Brewerytown economy in the 1920s and 1930s and the de-industrialization of Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s further constricted the local employment base. The Brewerytown neighborhood, historically teetering between industrial and residential uses, became fully

¹⁵*Philadelphia Real Estate Record & Builders' Guide* (hereafter *Record*) 1:24 (21 Jun. 1886): 279.

¹⁶George E. Thomas, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Brewerytown Historic District," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990.

¹⁷U.S. Census of Population, 1900, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Enumeration District 738; Nathaniel Burt and Wallace E. Davies, "The Iron Age. 1876–1905," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 483–485.

undesirable to white residents at this time and they moved to other areas of the city or to the expanding suburbs. Additionally, large houses were increasingly divided into multiple units and drew a slightly less affluent clientele to the streets.

By the still-segregated 1950s, the social composition of the vicinity had shifted once again; the majority of Christian and Jewish white residents had left and North Philadelphia became the one of the centers of the city's African-American population. Beginning in the mid-1920s, African Americans, in search of employment and drawn to the urban north from the rural south in the wake of agricultural depression, migrated to Philadelphia in large numbers—a great many ultimately settling in North Philadelphia. Not long after, desegregation and the expansion of the black middle class in the 1960s and 1970s led to a progressive emptying out of the area by those who could afford to leave. North Philadelphia remains an African-American enclave, and recent redevelopment efforts are aimed at reducing continued flight of residents out of the area, offsetting high vacancy rates, and shoring-up continued deterioration of the housing stock.

1800 BLOCK, W. GIRARD AVENUE

Constructed in 1889, Nos. 1816–1834 W. Girard Avenue provided cohesion for a stretch of Girard Avenue near its important—and increasingly commercialized—intersection with Ridge Avenue. Early in the century a modest row of eight attached dwellings (numbered 1814–1828) extended inward from N. Nineteenth Street, occupying the site of these later, more expansive residences. The earlier houses were still standing as late as 1888 as depicted on an insurance map.

In July 1889, an announcement noted that Willis G. Hale had designed ten houses at Nineteenth Street and Girard Avenue for real estate developer William Weightman.¹⁸ By the 1880s, Hale had become a well-known and prolific architect in Philadelphia, particularly in the blocks northwest of center city. He was the favored architect for streetcar barons Peter A. B. Widener and William L. Elkin's North Philadelphia projects. Under this notable patronage, Hale quickly became the eccentric architect for the city's *nouveaux riches*. Though not as “over-the-top” as some of his other residential commissions, the arch-detailing and buff-colored brick in the 1800 block of W. Girard Avenue sets the houses apart from other rows in the neighborhood. Construction of the dwellings most likely occurred soon after the notice appeared as a building contractor—B. Ketcham & Sons—had been selected and named in the announcement.

This nicely articulated residential row reinforced the mixed residential, civic, and commercial presence along one of North Philadelphia's premier east-west avenues and major transportation corridor from N. Broad Street to Fairmount Park and across the Schuylkill River.

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¹⁸*Record*, 4:26 (3 Jul. 1889): 306.

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HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs, Summer 2000.

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The documentation of 1800 Block, W. Girard Avenue was undertaken during the summer of 2000 as part of a larger program to record historic landmarks and historically significant structures in North Philadelphia. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER, and Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief of HABS; funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania and supplemented by a William Penn Foundation grant to the Foundation for Architecture for educational purposes. The project was planned and administered by HABS historian Catherine C. Lavoie and HABS architect Robert R. Arzola. The project historian was James A. Jacobs (George Washington University). Large format photography was undertaken by Joseph Elliott.